

Yasher koach, Samuel. For your Torah and Haftarah chanting. And for your d'var Torah. You approached it with so much feeling, thought, and humor, drawing out timeless insights for us all.

Parashat Vayakhel continues the Torah's lengthy instructions for building the tabernacle. Not only is it technical, but it's also seemingly repetitive. We already got a bunch of these laws three parshas ago in Parashat Terumah. And it just keeps going. But as you pointed out, Samuel, the timing of this repetition of laws is significant. This time, the laws for building the tabernacle come right after the episode of building the golden calf, when the Israelites commit the gravest sin in the entire Torah, donating their personal items to create a physical symbol, a forbidden idol, to which they bow down, and are subsequently punished.

The laws for constructing the mishkan appear on this side of the golden calf chapters almost as a rewind and reset – a chance to do things differently, to build the right thing this time, with the right materials, for a *sacred* purpose as opposed to a selfish one. *Kol N'div libo*, everyone whose heart was so moved, brought gifts to God.

And Samuel, you asked about why they were so eager, so happy to give, *n'div lev*, with a willing heart. And you gave us good answers. Perhaps they were excited to have a physical place to encounter an invisible God. Or maybe they felt so guilty about the golden calf that they were happy to have the chance to repent and course-correct. Perhaps still they were happy that they were able to transform their wealth into something holy. These are the most important answers from our tradition, even though they didn't quite convince you. And then you offered us your own take. Maybe they gave willingly and happily because they finally felt like they were in relationship with God, after God showed remorse for behaving so harshly in the previous parsha. In your words, God showed the people that, "God needs the Israelites as much as the Israelites need God. That's how a team is formed, when everybody relies on each other and helps each other out. And when someone is on your team, you naturally want to give to them."

That was very well put. And, I would add, it was a chiddush, a novel, original reading of the Torah text.

There is no doubt that this week's parsha is in conversation with last week's. And we get a hint of that fact in the very first word of the Torah portion. Vayakhel. And he convoked the people. Meaning Moses brought the people together. This word is almost identical to the word that sets up the drama in last week's parsha, where we read Vayikahel, meaning the people gathered themselves.

It's the same verb, from the root Kahal, meaning community. And without vowels, the words *appear* identical. In both cases, the people were coming together. But this week, Moses is calling them together. In the hifil, which is an active verbal construction. As opposed to the people being called in the nifal, which is, oddly, a passive form.

Now, frequently I come to you and offer a close reading of the Hebrew, and try to parse a world of meaning out of some grammatical flourish. But the discrepancy in phrasing really matters here. These two words, so close to one another in meaning, each set up diametrically opposite storylines, almost as foils of one another. And with them, we get two paradigmatic ways in which the people – or any people – might come together when they face something challenging.

In the case of last week, the people were afraid. They grow impatient with each passing day that Moses is away from them on the mountain, unsure of what to do, and they abandon their faith in God. Their anxiety leads them to react. To act impulsively. To give pieces of gold to Aaron who fashions a golden calf. Even though they knew better than to disobey God, their fear and their reactivity led them to sin because it felt good in the moment.

But here, in this parsha, the Israelites are guided not by fear, but by their relationship with God. They are not *reacting* to a feeling, so much as they are *responding* to a divine call. Coming together to fulfill a commandment and enact their highest ideals. Not only are they rewarded this time, in the

form of building a place for encountering the divine, but the word “lev,” meaning “heart,” appears 14 times in this parsha, more times than in any other – implying that the people had a change of heart, and proceeded from a place of love...or at least in a way that understood the heart of their mission.

In both cases, the people are coming together. And in both cases, they give. But as we see, they give in different ways and for different reasons. These divergent approaches are not merely a literary feature of the plot of Exodus, but they also represent two very human ways of responding to collective challenges. In Exodus 32, the people react impulsively as a mob to sublimate their feelings and receive instant gratification. And in Exodus 35, they act in concert with their values, which takes more time and isn't as carnally satisfying. But of course it's by being deliberate, acting with faith as opposed to fear, remaining true to their highest ideals, that the people build a tabernacle that will sustain them as a community throughout the rest of their wandering.

The lesson here is evergreen, that when we face a painful or daunting challenge, immediate *reactions* are less effective in the long run than deliberate, patient *responses*. And these days, I think that lesson is especially resonant.

We are living in a very reactive time. That's been true for a decade or maybe longer, but it has felt doubly true since October 7th, and magnified yet again since last year's election. We are scared and sad and angry, and inevitably we sometimes give in to the impulse to react. To post something quickly on social media, to say the first thought that popped into our heads, to argue, to rile up our peers when we feel hurt and distressed, to make snap judgements, statements and pronouncements. But behaving in this way tends not to get us very far.

I'm not saying there aren't things to react to. We know the ground keeps shifting and a great many injustices demand our attention. What I *am* saying is that we need to learn from our tradition, and from these two

opposite scenarios in Exodus, to understand the merit of taking a beat before springing to action, and responding instead in a manner consistent with our values. Because often when we react quickly, we escalate things. We ignite a second fire instead of extinguishing or harnessing the first. And we often wind up saying and doing things that are contrary to what we actually feel or know to be true.

This week, as the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas gave way to a resumed ground offensive in Gaza and rockets fired on Israel, we find ourselves in a kind of *deja vu*. For two months we have been holding our breath as the ceasefire held, as hostages were released, and innocent Gazans found what safety they could. But this week, we had to contend with the heartbreaking news that this war will continue. And with that news, we've also seen in our country and in our borough a renewed effort to condemn Israel and Zionism, which we can expect will also continue.

As we pray for and advocate for a permanent end to this war, and the release of the remaining hostages, it is especially important that we proceed with caution, as we approach those closer to home who do and say things with which we disagree. It will not serve us to react in the ways that often feel satisfying in the moment. Castigating, canceling and counter-protesting. Especially when this political era demands building solidarity with as many groups as possible in our efforts to protect American democracy. But given that we do feel anguish, rooted in our commitments to Israel, when we can't help but feel our feelings so intensely...what might it look like to be *responsive* as opposed to *reactive*? And how might we do that as a *kahal*, as a community.

For one thing, we can talk to each other about how we feel, admitting to others that we feel pain instead of lashing out from the place of that hurt. And in addition to that, once we process whatever it is that we feel, we can also approach individuals with whom we disagree with a loving curiosity about their views, hoping that they will approach ours with love and curiosity as well. In each of those ways, we can gather together for sacred purposes.

And there's another thing that we can do. Another cue from this week's parsha that might indeed be part of why the people are able to respond the way they do this time, as opposed to their reaction in last week's episode. At the beginning of Vayakhel, Moses recaps the laws of Shabbat:

On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Eternal.

Rashi comments that the reason this law is repeated here is to remind the people that even when there is other important work to be done, nothing supersedes the eternal need to rest. Even when it is important to respond, we might add, it is equally important to rest before we do so.

Perhaps this provides yet another answer to your question, Samuel. That unlike in last week's parsha, when the people were restive, this week, the people might've been more generous because they were well rested. Or at least understood the need to rest and pause before acting.

As we face, together, a world that remains so broken...as we approach so many moments of trauma and fear, both as Jews and as people who care about democracy and dignity for all peoples, may we find generosity in our hearts to respond to the challenges of our time in accordance with our highest ideals. As each day brings us contact with news and opinions that distress us, may we resist the impulse to *react* with profanity, and muster the courage to *respond* with sacredness. May we find ways to come together so that we can live out our values. And may we give ourselves the rest that allows us to do so.

Shabbat Shalom.